

Putin Requested Assad Step Aside, But Syrian Leader Refused

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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The head of Russia's military intelligence service, Colonel-General Igor Sergun, delivered a message late last year to Syrian President Bashar Assad on President Vladimir Putin's behalf — step aside. It was a request that Assad “angrily refused,” according to the Financial Times newspaper.

Citing information provided by two unidentified Western intelligence officials, the FT reported that Sergun — who died unexpectedly on Jan. 3 — was rebuffed by a defiant Assad. The Syrian president warned Russia would not have a role in Syria's future if he left office.

Dmitry Peskov, Putin's official spokesman, denied the Financial Times report when asked by reporters on Friday about Sergun's mission to Damascus. “No, that is not the case,” Peskov was quoted by Russia's RIA Novosti news agency as saying.

The FT report signals a growing schism between Putin and Assad just over three months after Moscow launched a surprise aerial intervention in Syria's 4 1/2-year-old civil war on the

embattled president's behalf.

Though Russia has yet to publicly ditch Assad, as the United States and its Western allies have repeatedly urged it to do, intelligence officials in the West told the FT that Moscow has become alarmed at the depth of problems facing the Syrian regime.

The FT cited one businessman close to the regime in Damascus as saying that Assad's government has grown suspicious of Russia's intentions as well. "Assad's people started to realize that having the big brother defending them meant he could also demand things of them too."

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